

Khamti Buddhism and Culture An Observation from a Visit to Khamti Land in Arunachal Pradesh in 2006*

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Introduction

Shan are Tai speaking peoples, called by Thai people in Thailand as “TaiYai” (ไทใหญ่) opposed to “Tai Noi” (ไทน้อย) which refers to Thai and Lao people. However, Shan call themselves “Tai” (ไต), “Tai Loung” or “Tai Luang” (ไตหลวง หรือ ไตหลวง).

Historically, it is said that Shan kingdom was the oldest Tai kingdom known as *Mawk Khao Mao Luang* Kingdom (อาณาจักรหมอกขาวมาหลวง) dated around 6th century. Later on, there was another center of Shan power called *Saenwi* Kingdom (อาณาจักรแสนหวี) which covered the land Shan State today. In the 13th century, a certain group of Shan migrated across *Khao Pad Kai* (Pad Kai Mountain Range- เทือกเขาปาดไก) to settle down on the other side of the mountain establishing Ahom Kingdom in the area of Assam, India today.

In late 8th to Early 19th century, a large group of Shan, e.g, *Tai Khamti* (ไทคำตี้), *Tai Ai-Ton* (ไทอายตอน), *Tai Pha-Ke* (ไทพ่าเก) from northern part of Shan State migrated to live in Assam and certain Tai Khamti group migrated to live in certain part of Arunachal Pradesh (อรุณาจัลประเทศ), India. All of these so-called Tais in various names are Shan people who all share common Shan culture.

Today majority of Shan people live in Shan State, Myanmar, but they also live in Dehong Prefecture in Yunnan, People’s republic of China which used to be the land of *Muang Mawk Khao Mao Luong* (เมืองหมอกขาวมาหลวง) in the old days, in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, India and also in northern Thailand, particularly in Maehongson province.

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In May 2005, there was a conference on Tai Studies at Muang Mao, Dehong, Yunnan. The conference was held in the context of the *Pao Po* festival which was the occasion that the Chinese government allowed the Shan people in Shan State to cross the border at Muang Mao to meet the Chinese Shan in Dehong and Tai Lue in Sipsongpanna, Yunnan, China. There, we met Chow Na Mein, a Khamti Minister of Education of Arunachal Pradesh who kindly invited us to visit Arunachal Pradesh. This then provided a chance for a group of Chulalongkorn university scholars* to visit Khamti land in Arunachal Pradesh in March 2006.

This paper is then inspired by my visit to Lohit District, Arunachal Pradesh, India in March 2006. Hardly anyone in Thailand is familiar with the name “Arunachal Pradesh” and can tell where it is. Very few Thai scholars have ever been to Arunachal Pradesh. Dr. Boonyong Kettthet, the first Thai scholar, went to do his Ph.D fieldwork about Khamti people in Arunachal Pradesh in 1984. And ever since, no or very few Thai scholars have been there again until in March 2006.

It was then interestingly to ask and worth exploring to what extent Khamti Shan have maintained their Shanness in the context of Arunachal Pradesh in India. Having inhabited among many other ethnic groups, e.g., Singpho, Monpa, Bengali, how do Khamti people have tried to preserve their Shan identity and through what kind of cultural mechanism, e.g., their language, their folklore, their Buddhist practice, etc.?

This paper will provide pictures and field data about Khamti Shan Buddhism and culture collected from observation, participant observation and interview gathered and experienced from my short visit to Lohit District, Arunachal Pradesh, India between 22-29 March 2006.

Village Setting

To get to Arunachal Pradesh, we flew from Bangkok to Guwahati, the capital city of Assam. In Assam, there are many ethnic groups, e.g. Bengali who are Hinduist; Tai Ahom, Tai Phake, Tai Ai-Ton who are Theravada Buddhist, etc. From Guwahati, we flew to Dibrugarh, a border town between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. It took about three hours by car from Dibrugarh

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to approach the borderland of Arunachal Pradesh entering Lohit district where the Khamti live.

Lohit district is situated by Lohit river which flows into Brahmaputra River in Assam. In Lohit district, there are 42 Khamti villages with approximately 28,000 Khamti people. The Khamti live among several other ethnic groups, e.g., Singpho, like Khamti, who are Theravada Buddhist; Monpas, Membas, Tsanglas and Khampas who are Tibetan Buddhist or Mahayana Buddhist; and Mishmis whose beliefs and rituals are indigenous in the worship of nature.

We visited about 10 Khamti villages: Namsai (น้ำทราย), Mo Mong (โมมิ่ง), Mak Mo (หมากโม), Chong Kham (จองคำ), Saen Sap (แสนสาม), Kherem (เคเรม), Um-pong (อุมปอง), Wing-go (วังโก), and Phanaeng (ผาเนง).

Like any other Shan or Tai villages elsewhere, these Khamti villages, are settled by the small river the water of which is used for rice growing. Each village has a temple which is used as the common ground for community religious and social gathering. Khamti houses are made by bamboo or wood. Rice barn storing rice paddy is located nearby. Textile weaving loom is placed under the house. The living ground is surrounded by bamboo trees, palm trees, coconut trees or mango trees and small vegetables garden.

Khamti Buddhist Belief and Tradition

A week before we arrived in Arunachal Pradesh was the time of the celebration of *Buddha Mahotsava* festival in which Arunachal people would worship the relics of the Lord Buddha for their prosperity and happiness. The host of this festival takes turn from one district to another and this year it was held at Chongkham, Lohit district. Accordingly, it can be seen that Buddhist festival is used for promoting Arunachal tourism and for harmonizing all the ethnic groups since everyone will be present in this festival to participate in cultural shows, traditional games and sport, festival food, elephant safari, boat safari, music and seminar.

Architecturally, Khamti Buddhist *chong* (จอง-temple), *kong mu* (เจดีย์-*chedi* containing the Buddha's relics) has similar style as any other Shan *chong* and *kong mu* elsewhere, e.g., in Dehong, Shan State or in Maehongson, Thailand.

In Namsai village, at the temple, we observed the presence of the image of *Phra Uppakutta* sitting in the shrine in the water. The Khamti call Phra Uppakutta as *Chao Sang Uk Puk* (เจ้าสงอุกปุก). Also in Um-pong village, there is an Uppakutta shrine situated by the river. It was explained by the Khamti people that Phra Uppakutta is the God of Protection or a protective guardian.

The belief in Phra Uppakutta and the cult of worshiping Phra Uppakutta as a protective guardian is widely found in Shan and Burmese popular Buddhism and also in northern Thailand and Laos (Strong 1992).

At the Kherem temple in Kherem Village, we met a *sala* (สถา-ช่างแกะพระพุทธรูป), one who makes the Buddha image. He showed us the very beautiful, kindly and peacefully looking Buddha image. This indicates the peaceful mind of the Khamti *sala* who must be a devout Buddhist. And also in this temple, we saw a *hang hod* (หางสดสร้ง-รางรดสร้ง), the long wooden naga shaped pipe used for pouring water over the monks in the *SangKaen* ceremony (ปล่อยสังแก่น/ปล่อยสังแก่น/สงกรานต์/ Shan New Year ceremony).

The celebration of *Sangkaen* is practiced by both Khamti and Singpho in Lohit district. It is reported that (Obang Tayeng 2006: 31) in the New Year celebration, people would sprinkle clean water over the image of the Buddha to evoke his blessing for protection against evil spirits. People also pour water over hands and feet of the monks and elderly people seeking for their blessing.

An interesting Khamti Buddhist tradition that we learned from visiting the Khamti temples is *poi lu lik* (ปล่อยลู่ลิก), the tradition of *dana dhamma* (ทานธรรม) in which people offer the *lik* (ลิก-a literary script made of palm leaf) to the temples. Whichever temples we visited, we would see tremendous amount of *lik* placed on top of one another in special shelves. Each *lik* is the script of certain Buddhist literature. Its first page tells who has such literature written for what purpose and for the benefit of whom. Actually, the tradition of offering Buddhist scripts to the temple is commonly practiced by any Theravada Buddhist Tais whether they are Tai Lue in Sipsongpanna, Tai Khoen in Chiangtung, in Shan State or Thai in northern and northeastern Thailand.

What is interesting is the Khamti tradition of selecting certain story for certain purpose to offer the *lik* to the temple. The selected Buddhist literature based on its content has a correlation with the purpose of the host. For instance, if one is sick and wish for good health, one will offer the story of *Sang pha ku* (แซงฟาคุ) to the temple. We asked for the reason and the Khamti explained that because this story has a certain part that a women built a toilet for the temple and it is believed that offering this story to the temple would help heal the sick person. To wish for good health, one would offer the story of *Susilakhantha* (สุสิลาขันธ). This was explained that since it has a part when Indra transforms somebody from an old man to a young man. The logic behind this is probably because to be younger indicates better health. Or, if one wants his children to be clever or wishes for wisdom, one would offer the story of *Chao Sang Nagasen Pa Maleng* (*Milindhapanha*- มิลินทปัญญา) since this story is the dialogue on dhamma issues between Nagasen Monk and King Milindha. If one wants

long life, one would offer *Su Mahavara* (สูมหาวาร). If a women cannot have a baby, she would offer the *tripitaka* by walking under the elephant

Accordingly, what we learn here is the function of Buddhist literature in Khamti Shan social context. It indicates how Khamti Shan use Buddhist literature for worldly purposes. The tradition of *poi lu lik* can then be seen as the mode of transmission of Buddhist literature. Hence, we can see how Buddhist literature is transmitted through Buddhist ritual.

At Phadaeng village, we can see another example of how literature is associated with ritual. The Khamti believe that Phadaeng temple has the oldest Buddhist text called *dhamma sangkhani* (ธรรมสังคณี).

The Khamti believe that this Buddhist text can be opened to read only on *Sangkaen Day*. On every *Sangkaen*, New Year's day, the text will be opened and changed the woven cloth that is used to tie around this sacred text. It is also believed that anyone who opens this text on other days will bleed. This reflects Khamti Shan folk belief and their pride of possessing and their means of protecting and preserving their over 200 year old Buddhist text that was brought along while migrating from Shan State to Arunachal Pradesh.

Overall, we have the impression that Khamti in Arunachal Pradesh are very good Buddhists. Their way of life is closely tied with Buddhist tradition. When we went to any villages, the monk and old people would take us to the temple and showed us the *lik* they had. At Wing-go Village, the abbot showed us *Lik of the Five Buddhas* (ลิกพระเจ้าห้าพระองค์). At Mo-mong Village, the monk showed us the *Lik of Vinaya pitaka* (พระวินัยปิฎก). Old people wear white blouse with proper white cloth over; this white cloth will be placed down when they pay respect to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangkha.

However, as it is observed that wherever Buddhism reached, it would be mixed with the indigenous or other religious traditions in the area. Here we also observed the co-existence between Buddhism and Hinduism, e.g., the co-presence of the pictures of the Buddha and Goddess Sarasawati in the temple at Um-Pong Village. Goddess Sarasawati is the Goddess of Liberal Arts. In the picture, we then saw Goddess Sarasawati standing on the *lik* and on the left side is the picture of the Buddha.

And also, in one of the villages we visited, there was some kind of *pha yantra* (ผ้ายันต์), called by Khamti as *Ung* which is a magic cloth placed on the top part of the door. The pictures on the cloth reflect various figures, e.g. the Buddha and Phra Sivalee representing Buddhism; the two Naga, the frog-man and the gourd symbolizing the indigenous beliefs in Gods of Fertility.

Thus, what we experienced in the Khamti land in Lohit district is the dominance of Theravada Buddhism with the co-existence and, probably in certain rituals, the syncretism with animism and Hinduism or any other indigenous beliefs which we can probably call such religious practices, “Khamti Shan Buddhism.”

Khamti *Chaofa* Political System

Shan people has a unique political system called “*chaofa*” (ระบบเจ้าฟ้า). The word is pronounced as *chao bha* (เจ้าฟ้า) or *sao bha* in Shan. According to the myth of *Khun Lu Khun Lai*, Shan believe that the king or people who are at the head position of the kingdom and also the head of the town level are *chaofa*, descendants of heaven.

Sumitr Pitipatra et al (2002: 43-46) reported that the Khamti in Shan State live on the land called *Khamti Luang* (คำดีหลวง/คำดีโหลง) in northern Shan State. *Khamti Luang* is composed of 7 muang (town), e.g., Muang Kong (เมืองกอง), Muang Meed (เมืองมีด), Muang Yang (เมืองยาง), Maung Sua (เมืองเสือ). According to the Khamti myth, these muangs were built by brothers who are *chaofa*. These brothers were believed to be descendants of Chao Luang Sua Khan Fa (เจ้าหลวงเสือข่านฟ้า), the Great king of Mawk Khao Mao Luang kingdom. It is also believed that people in the land of *Khamti Luang* were migrated from Muang Mao and they continued their *chaofa* political system. And when the Khamti migrated to Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, they divided their territory into towns, each town has *chaofa* as the head. The position of *chaofa* is transmitted through their sons. Such is how the *chaofa* political system has persisted where ever the Shan live.

Accordingly, Shan in Shan State, Myanmar, in Dehong Prefecture, Yunnan as well as in Arunachal Pradesh do have their political structure governed by the *chaofa* system. In Lohit district, there are *Chaofa* of Um-Pong, Kherem, Mo Mong and Chongkham.

When we visited Um-Pong, we were invited to the house of *Chaofa*. He showed us his hat, sword, and the *Lik* of *Dhammasatra* - the symbols of *chaofa* as ruler. *Chaofa* at Mo Mong showed us an old *lik* recording the history of their migration from Shan State to Arunachal Pradesh and the history of the ancestors of the 8 major clans in Arunachal Pradesh. At Chongkham, we met Chao Khamune who is the *Chaofa Luang* (เจ้าฟ้าโหลง-เจ้าฟ้าหลวง), the King of *chaofa*, who is the oldest *chaofa* –85 years old. He has his own temple and *kong mu*.

Thus, it can be seen that although the Khamti migrated to Arunachal Pradesh over 200 years ago, they remain their *chaofa* political system and do respect the royal blood of their *Chaofa*. Shan people look up to their *chaofa* with respect and believe in their *chaofa*'s royal blood.

Khamti Folklore and Folklife

Apart from Buddhist literature already mentioned above, Khamti in Arunachal Pradesh do have many myths and folktales. We tried to explore the names of the myths and folktales commonly known among the Khamti and other Tai speaking peoples.

For myth, they have creation myth and the story of *Khun Lu-Khun Lai*, Shan ancestors who climbed the ladder from heaven to settle down on earth together with Shan people. The story of *Khun Lu-Khun Lai* is also told among Dehong Tai in Yunnan, Tai Phake and Tai Ahom in Assam and Shan in Shan State; wherever the Shan live, they are all descendants of *Khun Lu-Khun Lai*.

Besides, the Khamti also have the *myth of Sangkaen* to justify the Songkran festival similarly told among other Theravada Buddhist Tais . In Thailand we told the story of Kabilaprom who has seven daughters who have to take turn carrying the father's head for fear that if the father's head falls down, it would cause fire. The Khamti version is similarly told since the head of Khun Sang who is the Chief God cannot be fallen down to the ground for the same reason so his four daughters have to take turn carrying their father's head.

For folktales, the Khamti have many stories which can be categorized as folk jataka, e.g., *Along Hoi Khao* (อะลองหอยขาว), *Along Khao Hom* (อะลองข้าวหอม), *Along Nu Phuek* (อะลองหนูเผือก), *Along Chang Phuek* (อะลองช้างเผือก), *Along Ngo Luang* (อะลองงัวโหลง), *Along Nok Yung* (อะลองนกยูง). Besides, the Khamti here as well as the Shan elsewhere know well the legend of *Upam Samlo* (อุแปม สามลล), the story of the tragic triangle love between one woman and two men ending with the death of all the leading characters.

While sitting and talking in the village one day, we began to ask the Khamti about their folksongs. They told us about songs accompanying rituals, such as “*Ey Sangkaen*” (เอี้ยสังแก่น) which people sing in the New Year celebration. Also, there are songs singing while weaving new robe for monks in *poi kathin*. They said that the song is about the wish to finish weaving the robe in one day and night in order to be offered to the monks in *Kathin* ceremony.

We asked about Khamti favorite song that every Khamti would know and sing, they sang a song which touched us deeply. Here is the song:

“แสนโหลงนำเมืองเฮาไต ไวสาลี พาราเกียยัง จองเกียยัง ตาราเกียยัง เมืองเฮาไต....”

which can be translated as follows:

“Our Muang Tai, Waisali, is beautiful. In our Muang Tai, there are always monks, temples and dhamma, our good muang Tai.....”

The song impressively reflects the pride of being in a Buddhist Land. Although the Khamti are far away from their motherland, the Shan State, what is left in their mind is their good memory and their ongoing of Theravada Buddhist practice in their normal daily life. My impression is that, living among other ethnic groups, the Khamti Shan express their identity through their being good Buddhist, as if they want to say, *“To be Khamti is to be Buddhist.”*

Concerning “being Shan,” there was another interesting thing that we learned from the field. One of the Khamti showed us the DVD of Thai television drama dubbed with Shan language. We were told that the popular drama series in Thai televisions are made into DVD dubbed in Shan. These DVD are widely sold in Shan land in Shan State and also cross the border to be sold in Arunachal Pradesh, India.

This interestingly indicates the association between being Shan with being Thai. Although this is not quite “pan Tai movement”, but it reflects the identity of Shanness with Thainess through Thai drama exported to Shanland. Thus, whether the Shan are in Myanmar or India, it can be observed that their ethnic consciousness is related to “Tai” or “Thai” rather than with the countries they are inhabited.

Concluding Remarks

It can now be seen that the Khamti, living far away in the land that not many people would ever be able to go, among many other ethnic groups in Arunachal Pradesh, impressively maintain and preserve their Shan ethnic identity, e.g., being Theravada Buddhist, continuing their *chaofa* political system, growing rice as any other Tai groups as their main subsistence, speaking Tai languages. It is also fascinating to learn that where ever the Shan live, in Shan State, in Dehong, or in Arunachal Pradesh, they share, to a large extent, Shan culture with their *phi-nong* Shan.

Shan in Thailand today may have already been assimilated to Thai culture. But from what I myself have witnessed, I must say that Khamti Shan in Arunachal Pradesh, since they live in quite a remote area, seem to remain their Shanness as if they were still in northern Shan State where they departed long time ago.

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